

Dionysios Solomos: The Tree of Poetry

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Dionysios Solomos is a poet of contradictions. The fact is not often admitted either by his supporters or his occasional detractors. But there is a puzzling ambiguity about the poet which is only exacerbated by the labels that have been tied round his neck. Solomos, we are told, is one of the European Romantics, he is the father of modern Greek poetry, an epic poet *manqué*.

But how then was it that the son of an Italian-speaking count and a Zantiot peasant, educated in Italy and all his life more fluent in Italian than in Greek, should have become the first serious poet to develop the resources of the demotic Greek language? Or how is the 'national bard' who on hearing of Lord Byron's death at Mesolonghi, allegedly jumped up on the tavern table and improvised the first stanza of the 'Lyrical Poem on the Death of Lord Byron', to be reconciled with the quiet methodical recluse, working and re-working the incomplete fragments of 'The Free Besieged' in hopes of finding a perfect form for ideas that quite clearly go far beyond national enthusiasm?

Solomos' fragmentary output and certain of his attitudes seem to belong to the Romantic movement, but his refusal of subjectivity places him outside it. There is no evidence that any of his poems stem from 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Emotional though many of them are, there is always a consciousness of deliberate composition: the poet stands apart. Solomos was aptly distinguished from Byron, some hundred

years later, by the poet Kostis Palamas: 'Whatever in Byron's poetry derives from his bleeding heart, in Solomos is but a step of the artist who is moving towards objectivity; towards the meaning of art.'¹

Beneath the labels and the assumptions, Solomos is a difficult figure to pin down; if, however, we are prepared to take him on his own ground, some of the contradictions can be fitted into place.²

I

The three finest poems of Solomos' maturity—'The Cretan', 'The Free Besieged' and 'Porfyra' (Shark)³—exist only as fragments. But this, as I hope to point out, is deceptive; of the three, only 'The Free Besieged' is really incomplete.

That fact that these poems have come down to us in fragmentary form is not, as the early editors thought, merely an unfortunate nuisance. It says much about the poet that he was capable of writing short, lyrical pieces of high intensity, but could not lower his standards sufficiently to connect them together with more routine narrative verse. To quote Palamas again, 'This poetry is philosophical, but it is wholly *imagist*'⁴ [my italics].

The sense in which Solomos' method may possibly foreshadow that of the Imagists need not concern us here. But Palamas is exactly right in his description. Solomos' technique is based on juxtaposition of images, rather than on traditional narrative or description.

1. K. Palamas, *Γύρω στὸ Σολωμό*, II (Athens, 1927), p. 55.

2. Solomos has never been given the critical attention, at least in English, that he deserves. Three critical accounts have appeared: R. Jenkins, *Dionysios Solomos* (Cambridge, 1940); P. Sherrard, *The Marble Threshing Floor: Studies in Modern Greek Poetry* (London, 1956); M. B. Raizis, *Dionysios Solomos* (Twayne's World Author Series: New York, 1972). Of these only that by Sherrard makes a serious attempt to interpret Solomos, while the other two give mainly biographical accounts of the poet's development, with much attention to his services to the modern Greek language and to explaining the fragmentary nature of his works.

3. All references are to the collected two-volume edition by L. Politis, *D. Solomos, Complete Works*, I: *Poems* (Athens, 1948); II: *Prose and Italian Works* (Athens, 1955). For 'The Cretan' see I, pp. 197–216; for 'The Free Besieged', I, pp. 207–50; and for the 'Porfyra', I, pp. 251–5.

4. K. Palamas, *Ὁ ποιητὴς Σολωμός, βίος καὶ ἔργο* (Athens, 1897); republished in K. Palamas, *Διονύσιος Σολωμός*, ed. M. Hatzidakoumis (Athens, 1970).

This is fairly clear in 'The Cretan'. In this poem the numbering of the fragments gives the impression that large sections are missing, but in fact 'The Cretan' has most of the hallmarks of a finished poem.⁵ A little tidying up, removal of the fragment numbers, and it could stand on its own. But the poetic canons of the day would no more have tolerated such a condensed, cryptic poem, than they tolerated 'Kubla Khan'. For Solomos, the perfectionist, as for Coleridge, the professed 'incompleteness' was merely disguise.

As there are no adequate translations of Solomos to which reference might be made, I will quote in full from my own translation of 'The Cretan'. In this only two brief sections, of minor importance, have been omitted, and the fragment numbers removed to the margin, so as not to break up the poem's essential continuity.

XVIII (6 lines describing the storm omitted)

XIX

Believe that what I say shall be pure truth.

This I swear by my body's many wounds,

By those who fought by me and fell in Crete,

By the soul that grieved me sore, this world
forsaking.

(Speak, trumpet, and I shall tear the shroud,

Crying to the pallid Resurrected:

'Know you the beauty by which the Vale is
hallowed?

Speak, for you will see in her your likeness.

No smut of earth remains, and heaven's made
new.

I love her still and with her shall be judged.'

5. It was Polyas, the first editor of Solomos, who conflated the six versions of 'The Cretan' that existed in manuscript and established the convention by which the fragments are always numbered 18–22. Polyas comments, on the opening section of the poem, 'As will be apparent from the beginning of the Fragment, the same is a continuation of a Poem, the seventeen preceding chapters of which the good man had previously composed, or at the least had sketched. Of these, however, no trace was found among the surviving papers'. See A. Terzakis, *Διονυσίου Σολωμού Τὰ Εὑρισκόμενα* (Corfu, 1859), p. 159. There is no other evidence that Solomos had any intention of writing seventeen sections to precede the existing fragments. On the unity of 'The Cretan' see the excellent monograph by D. N. Maronitis, *Δ. Σολωμός: ολέποχες τοῦ "Κρητικοῦ"* (Athens, 1975).

'We saw her early where she stood on high,
 And the flowers trembled by the gate
 Of Paradise where singing she came forth.
 Her voice was joy and sang the Resurrection,
 In haste to be united with the flesh.
 All Heaven heard with rapture, and the
 embers
 Of the burning world were briefly doused.
 She was but now before us, going with haste.
 This way and that she looks and someone
 seeks.')

XX

So reigned the thunder,
 And the sea, that raged like boiling broth,
 Was quieted; all calm and polished clean,
 Fragrant as flowers, it mirrored all the stars.
 Nature, by some deep mystery constrained,
 Shone forth in beauty and forgot her wrath.
 No breath in all of sea and sky that blows
 So much as the bee alighting on the flower.
 But close by the Girl, who gladly clung to me,
 The full moon trembled limpid on the water.
 At once unfolds a wonder, and from that spot
 Issues before me One clothed in the moon.
 The cool light shivered at the godlike vision,
 Her eyes' black depths and hair of gold.

XXI

She gazed on the stars and they exulted
 Growing brighter, not hiding her from sight.
 Without a wrinkle on the sea she rose,
 A cypress insubstantial all her height,
 Spreading her arms in humility and passion—
 In her were goodness and beauty to the full.
 The night was flooded with the light of noon,
 The world a temple, shining all about.
 At last she turned to me amid the waters,
 Spellbound as the compass by the Pole,
 To me, not to the Girl, she bent her head:
 Heavy my fate, I gazed, and so did she.
 I said I had seen her once, a long time past,

- Painted in a church, perhaps, with wondrous
 art
 Or figured by thoughts and fantasy of love
 Or as I dreamed and sucked my mother's
 milk—
 An ancient memory, sweet, unthought
 That rose before me then in all its power
 Like water that the eye sees bubbling forth
 From crevices dark, and sparkling in the sun.
 My eyes became a fountain and for long
 That godlike face was hidden from my sight,
 For then I felt her eyes that pierced my bowels
 That, shaking and trembling, held me back
 from speech.
 But these are gods, that look from whence
 they dwell
 Down into the abyss where is the heart
 Of man: she read my mind, I vow, more
 clearly
 Than ever could my tongue have told my
 grief:
 'See in my entrails what suffering has sown.
 See how my heart is full to overflowing;
 My brothers in their prime the Turks seized
 from me,
 Defiled my sister, killed her in hot blood,
 My ailing father they burnt to death at
 evening,
 At first light drowned my mother in the well.
 I filled my hands with Cretan earth and came,
 Help me, Goddess, protect this tender
 shoot—
 My only hold to keep me from the abyss.'
 Sweetly she smiled at hearing my soul's grief,
 Tears darkened her eyes, and they were like
 my love's.
 Gravely perplexed, the beating of my heart
 Became yet louder against my loved one's
 side,
- XXI, 37 variant
- XXII
- XXII, 3–20
 omitted

3 lines added
from var.

Going like a deer that flees the hunter's
arrows
Shunning the close-twined branches hung
with flowers
For brightly flowing water—so my heart,
Perplexity all ceased, found open refuge
Where a sound most sweet came forth to
soothe it.
No young girl's voice beneath the spreading
woods,
The hour of the evening star and the waters'
darkening,
Who sings to nature of her hidden love,
To the tree, to the flower that opens and bends
to earth;
No voice of Cretan nightingale whose song,
On the high bleak crags where he has his nest,
In its sweetness echoes murmuring all night
long
By the distant sea and the plain far off,
Until the stars dissolve before the Dawn,
Who, hearing, drops the roses from her
fingers;
Nor is it the shepherd's pipe I used to hear
On Psiloriti, where lonely sorrow led me,
And I saw the star of heaven full at noon,
The mountains, seas and plains in light
exulting
And hope of freedom seizing my breast,
I cried,
O holy motherland, my country soaked in
blood!
Weeping then, I spread my hands with pride
On the blackened stones I loved, and
shrivelled grasses.
Speech, bird, or singing voice, none can
match
That sound, whose like perhaps is gone from
earth.
It is not words, but a sound as light as air,

Too soft to echo even from close at hand.
 If it was near I know not, or from afar
 Like scent of May was wafted by the air
 With odours sweet surpassing all description:
 Love and Death, I doubt, have scarce such
 power.
 The sound seized all my soul and quite shut
 out
 The sky, the sea, the shore, even my Girl;
 It seized me; many times it made me yearn
 To leave behind my body and to follow.
 It ceased; drained empty nature and my soul
 That sighed and at once was filled with
 my beloved.
 And now at last the shore: I set her down
 Upon the sand with joy, but she was dead.

Only the opening is unclear. The speaker in the first four lines is the Cretan, who has escaped with his beloved from a massacre. The portion in brackets is not specifically related, and seems to be a kind of 'Prologue in Heaven'.

Given the context of this prologue in the rest of the poem, other things fall into place. The beautiful woman sought out at the Resurrection could be either the Cretan's beloved or the woman of the vision. In fact she must be both, and so this Prologue subtly prepares us for the death of the Girl at the end of the poem.

The shock of the final line remains, of course, but on a second reading of the poem the pattern becomes visible. The vision and the supernatural calm are the true *essence* of the human being the Cretan loves, which can only be made visible through her destruction as a physical being. But at the same time the living person is the natural extension of the incorporeal 'Beauty' of the vision, without whose existence (and sacrifice) the spiritual manifestation could not exist.

It is this paradox which gives the poem its extraordinary tension. In the opening prologue the setting is the Resurrection, and the Girl was 'In haste to be united with the flesh'. And at the same time the holocaust in which the physical world is being consumed is momentarily abated. Solomos is thinking here of

the passage in Dante where the souls in Paradise are nostalgic for their bodies—not their earthly bodies of course but the eternal bodies they have been promised at the Resurrection. The passage in Dante is a rare imaginative insight, with the realization that there might be something unsatisfactory, incomplete, in a purely insubstantial existence.

Tanto mi parver subiti e accorti
e l'uno e l'altro coro a dicer 'Amme!';
che ben mostrar disio de' corpi morti;
forse non pur per lor, ma per le mamme,
per li padri e per li altri che fuor cari
anzi che fosser sempiterne fiamme.⁶

Echoing this passage, Solomos is concerned to show how the spiritual or ideal world is not independent of the physical.

The end of the poem presents the other half of this paradox. The unearthly music ceases, and the Cretan, for his part, is eager 'to leave behind my body and to follow'. The setting of these final lines is purely earthly, in exact contrast to the 'Prologue'. And here the *movement* is from physical life towards the spiritual; the Girl dies, completely identified with the vision, as the Cretan himself longs to be. The end is tragic—the Girl is dead, the Cretan is confined to his world and the apparition to hers.

Solomos uses this technique of juxtaposition to present the twin worlds of physical and spiritual, or ideal, as complementary, separated by a tension almost sexual, mutually dependent and yet unable to interact except in a moment of supreme tension that leaves a tragic aftermath.

The poem 'Porfyra' (Shark), was drafted some fifteen years after Solomos stopped work on 'The Cretan'. It is the last in the trilogy of great fragmentary pieces and quite possibly the nearest to completion. In this poem certain of the themes and images of 'The Cretan' recur. This time, however, the central paradox is introduced in the cryptic opening:

6. Dante, *Paradiso*, XIV. 61–6: 'So they appeared ready and eager, both the one chorus (of souls) and the other, to cry "Amen", and thus clearly showed their longing for their mortal bodies; not perhaps for themselves but for the sake of their mothers or fathers or others who were dear to them before they became sempiternal flames.'

Hell, ever wakeful, circled you about
But powerless yet unless far off, beyond
The bounds of Paradise, in which you share,
And—do you hear it?—yearns within your breast.

Having stated this, the poet switches to an immediate situation. A young English soldier is lying on his back in the water off Corfu, admiring the peace and beauty of the sunset. The device is the familiar one of the soliloquy, but notice how closely the imagery parallels that of the supernatural calm in 'The Cretan':

Throw, Night, a thousand stars upon the water,
And smile among the flowers, black rocky cleft.
The gold-winged bird is near and circles me
Leaving at once the branch for the stony shore
And there he hears the glories of sea and sky
And there draws out his song with all his magic.
Sweetly he bound the sea and desert rocks
And cries on the star of evening to come forth.

Keeping the other poem in mind, we realize that Solomos is not offering mere soft sentimental gush about an evening bathe. In 'The Cretan' the state of absolute calm was the antithesis of the storm raging all around, and could only appear, paradoxically, at the moment when the destructive violence was at its height. We now have more than a hint of what Solomos means by this ominous opening line—'Hell, ever wakeful, circled you about . . . '.

The soldier is at one with Nature: the image is familiar from the generation of the Romantics:

Nature smiled like lightning, became his own,
Hope, you bound his mind with all your magic:
New earth all about, new earth of joy and goodness.

But for Solomos Nature is not to be confused with the 'sublime' of the English Romantics. To this same Nature belongs the shark, the 'tiger of the seas' that suddenly attacks from behind. The youth awakes from his peaceful communion

with the beauties of Nature, not to a sense of horror or desperation but to the joy of 'his body, naked and free as the lightning'. The two seemingly incompatible faces of Nature are united only at the moment of destruction, when its beauty and its violence supplement one another.

In a flash of light the young man knew himself.

Throughout this poem, whose theme of contraries momentarily united is close to that of 'The Cretan', the imagery is kept just within the limits of the natural world. Paradise is described as a natural experience: it is the nearest approach of the physical world to the realm of magic (the bird 'draws out his song with all his magic' and 'sweetly . . . bound the sea and desert rocks'.) But it is an earthly Paradise, within Nature, and it is worth noting that neither heaven nor hell in the poem is associated with moral reward or punishment.

Once again body and soul, heaven and hell, are brought so close that we see them as opposite facets of the same thing. In both poems ('Porfyra' and 'The Cretan') the tension between opposites is drawn out to an unbearable limit, when they are suddenly reversed and in the instant of changing over, are seen as one. Such is the dual nature of the Girl and the vision, the storm and calm in 'The Cretan', and of Paradise and Hell in the 'Porfyra'.

Perhaps the most complex of Solomos' mature poems and also, in its present form, the least satisfactory, is 'The Free Besieged', about the siege and destruction of Mesolonghi in 1826. The kind of paradox I have been trying to illustrate is apparent here in the title, and from the existing fragments of the poem it seems that the two states were to be seen as opposite sides of the same coin. Only through being besieged and reduced to the lowest imaginable physical and moral condition, could the defenders be worthy or capable of their final act of freedom—to leave the town and face the enemy.

Solomos wrote three successive drafts of 'The Free Besieged', of which the second is the fullest, although the fragments of the final draft, in which the rimes were dropped, are usually more connected and poetically of higher quality. Most of my illustrations will be taken from the second draft.

Solomos conceived of the siege and fall of Mesolonghi on several levels. As a result, the poem gilds the sordid facts with a moral significance and a grandeur which it is hard to reconcile with history.⁷ When this is compared with Homer's or even Milton's description of warfare, it is striking how diametrically opposed were Solomos' interests to those of the epic poets.

It is likely that Solomos considered the factual details of the siege and sortie much less important than the total schema he was weaving around them. His descriptions of the hunger and desperation of the defenders, of the young woman who dreamed that an angel offered her his wings but she refused to use them, preferring to die with the others, tend towards the grandiose gesture in the manner of Delacroix.⁸

Granted, however, that the poem fails to be epic or dramatic, it is not surprising that its highest qualities are those it shares with the great lyric poems of Solomos' maturity, and it is in terms of those qualities that the poem deserves to be discussed.

One of the greatest sections of the poem (which has been preserved in two successive drafts), has been given the title 'The Temptation', and describes with Solomos' characteristic mastery of images, the beauties of Nature that surround the citadel. Solomos says of this description, that the beauties of Nature increase the determination of the Turks to possess the land, but also 'the pain of the besieged that they will lose it.'⁹

Even within this description, Solomos manages to remind us of the ambivalence of Nature, which also forms the core of the 'Porfyra':

Carefree to the waters of the lake comes
The pale blue butterfly sporting with his shadow,
Fragrant from sleep at the wild lily's heart;
Where of a sweet hour nestles the tiny worm.¹⁰

And the climax of the description characteristically heightens the tension within the poem close to the limits of endurance:

7. See for example W. St. Clair, *That Greece might still be Free. The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (Oxford, 1972), for a brutally unsentimental account of these events.

8. See for example the painting by Delacroix of 'Greece expiring on the ruins of Mesolonghi'.

9. Ed. Politis, I, p. 216.

10. Ibid., p. 217.

Who dies today a thousand deaths will die.

At the end of this description in the later, unrimed version, come the lines,

No breath of wind in earth or sea or sky,
So much as the bee makes, close to the tender petals;
Around an unmoving whiteness on the lake
The round moon gathers, mingling with it alone,
And clothed in its light a fair young girl comes forth.¹¹

This is a clear reminder of 'The Cretan' and a hint that the experience of that poem is about to be repeated in a still more complex form.

The tension is increased yet further. Like the soldier, unsuspecting that hell 'circles him about', the Mesolonghians are

Roses of God now fallen into hell.¹²

The Great Mother (Hellas) appears, in order to partake of the defenders' sufferings, and 'breathes Paradise upon them.' She is described as radiant:

Who flashed an undying smile, plaything of her joy,
With the light of her goodness, light of her beauty.¹³

As in the 'Porfyra' it is light, or lightning, that brings the two worlds into contact, and this figure of 'Hellas' is a clear development from the 'Lady clothed in the moon' of 'The Cretan'. The twin poles of physical and spiritual seem for a moment to have come together: the Great Mother is at once the intangible symbol of the defenders' ideals, and an abstraction from the physical land—like the Lady in 'The Cretan', and depends for her existence on 'The blackened stones I loved and shrivelled grasses'.

But the resolution is still not in sight. The siege of Mesolonghi by the Turks is also the siege of the soul by physical Nature. (This section of the poem exists only in a prose draft.)

11. Ibid., p. 243.

12. Ibid., p. 230.

13. Ibid., p. 231.

All of life, from all parts of Nature, wishes to capture the soul of man: sea, earth, sky blended together, surface and depth blended together, besiege the nature of man on the surface and in its depth.¹⁴

This appears at first sight to give weight to Sherrard's reading of 'The Cretan', and also of this poem, that 'the world is a prison-house of wrath and it is only through great struggle involving the sacrifice of all that is natural that man can attain happiness'.¹⁵

But as we have seen, 'Nature' and 'the soul of man' are mutually dependent. Solomos never defends the ascetic way of life, to the extent of upholding one side of the coin at the expense of the other. Wholeness is possible only at the moment where such opposites are united—as, in this poem, by the sortie of the defenders. The soul charges bravely into the world of physical Nature, the two complete one another and are destroyed.

Of the actual sortie nothing is said in any of the three drafts. Only a couple of disjointed fragments give a hint of how the poem might have ended.

From depth to depth he fell until there was
None other: issued thence invincible.

.

Light that tramples smiling hell and death.¹⁶

Hell, or death, is harrowed by light. The word I have translated 'smiling' really means 'rejoicing', but Solomos has placed it in such a way that it can refer either backwards or forwards. In this way a link is formed between incompatible worlds: this line graphically shows how rejoicing, an attribute of light, is extended finally to the opposite of light, to hell and death.

But of course, as in the 'Porfyra', this union of opposites can only be momentary and tragic. The defenders of Mesolonghi were mostly massacred.

14. Ibid., p. 216.

15. Sherrard, op. cit., p. 24.

16. Ed. Politis, I, p. 235.

More helpful for an understanding of the workings of Solomos' poetry is the series of notes the poet made while working on 'The Free Besieged'.

It all begins, in a note often quoted, with the seed. 'Apply to the spiritual form the story of a plant, which begins from the seed and returns to that state, having passed through, as degrees of its development, all the shapes of the plant, the roots, the trunk, the leaves, flowers and fruit.'¹⁷

The poem, that is to say, is the *spiritual* expression of the *organic* process that begins with the seed, grows, flowers, bears fruit that dies to become a seed once more.

But this is only a beginning. Another note appears to say exactly the opposite. 'Let the poem be a bodiless spirit, which flows from God, and after being made flesh in the organs of time, place, nationality, language with their various thoughts, feelings, inclinations etc. (let a small world come into existence capable of making this manifest), in the end returns to God.'¹⁸

Here we find Solomos, in discussing his art, applying the same type of paradox as continually emerges in his poems. The two ideas are exactly complementary; in the first the poem is drawn from physical, organic growth (this is the poem as *plant*), in the second, it is the *bodiless spirit* which issues from God, made flesh.

If we accept these two ideas as polarities in Solomos' concept of 'the poem', it is possible to see other key-ideas ranging themselves on one side or the other. Before you can have a poem at all, he says, you must have an Idea, which you must consider deeply and fixedly. 'In this (Idea)', he goes on, 'will be embodied the most substantial and highest content of true human nature, Fatherland and Faith.'¹⁹

This statement is anything but precise until we remember the assumptions already in the poet's mind as he wrote it—and all of these notes were of course written for himself only. The word 'embody' is an obvious reminiscence of 'make flesh' in the last note quoted, and it is clear that Solomos is thinking about the same process in both cases. The internal opposition contained

17. Ibid., p. 207.

18. Ibid., p. 209.

19. Ibid., p. 209.

in the phrase describing the Idea as 'most substantial' and 'highest' corresponds exactly to that of 'Fatherland' and 'Faith'. The first half refers to a physical thing rendered ideal, the second to the spiritual made manifest.

This is further developed in another note. 'The basic (*or* foundation) rhythm' (previously associated with language) 'should be supported at the centre of Nationality, and should rise vertically, while the meaning, from which poetry wells up, and which it serves, spreads out by degrees in its circles.'²⁰

The simple image of the plant has become much more complicated. 'Nationality' relates obviously back to 'Fatherland' and belongs with the physical things imaged by the plant. The 'meaning' on the other hand—all that is highest in poetry—belongs with 'Faith' and the 'bodiless spirit'. The process of the poem 'welling up' and spreading out in circles is again reminiscent of the different forms the 'bodiless spirit' can take after issuing from God—the 'organs of time, place, nationality, language with their various thoughts, feelings, inclinations etc.'. The spirit descending is distributed ever farther from its central source.

Thus while the 'plant' grows vertically upwards, the 'bodiless spirit' fans out 'by degrees in its circles'. And this opposition clearly relates to the oppositions of the poems, of heaven and hell, soul and body.

From this analysis two things become clear. The first and most important is the nature of the role Solomos ascribed to his art. These notes describe a drama as a complex as that of 'The Free Besieged', in which the protagonist is poetry. It is a drama reminiscent of the Incarnation, where the spirit descending from God is grafted on to the mortal seed and offers salvation (completeness?) through its mysteriously dual nature. Or as Solomos himself put it, 'One must study the substantial shadow, which shall put forth the bodies with which it shall itself be united and made manifest. . . . In this manner the Metaphysical became Physical.'²¹

The second point is that Solomos' thinking, although obscured by the fragmentary appearance of his work, was more systematic than has generally been realised. But the manner of

20. Ibid., p. 208.

21. Ibid., p. 209.

its expression does not suggest that Solomos was deeply read in philosophy, although he had read Plato and had some knowledge of contemporary German thinkers, particularly Hegel. Hegel's influence has occasionally been adduced—for example by Raizis who follows Varnalis in the belief that 'Solomos considered poetry as lying in the absolute sphere of the Spirit, next to religion and philosophy, as Hegel did.'²² I think I have already shown that Solomos' views on poetry cannot be so simply defined; and the peculiar system he evolved probably cannot be ascribed to Hegel.

III

There are good reasons, on the contrary, for attributing aspects of this system to Dante, whose works Solomos knew well and admired profoundly. Dante's claims for the role of poetry are no less extreme than those of Solomos. And besides, Dante's sponsorship of the spoken Italian of his day had been a constant example to Solomos in his efforts to establish the demotic as the language of Greek poetry.

But of course Solomos admired more of Dante than the *De Vulgare Eloquentia*. He knew that the Dantescan cosmology was based on a mystical concept widespread in the middle ages—that the universe is an infinite sphere with its circumference at the centre. What this means in the *Commedia* is that Satan lies at the centre of gravity of a spherical universe. But God, as the fountain and source of all things, also, in a different sense, lies at the universal centre. The celestial rose where Dante finally sees God is beyond all the circles of Paradise, but, by changing the image subtly, Dante makes it also the centre. In a famous Dantescan image, God is the root from which the tree of Paradise descends, spreading outwards in the various circles.

IV

Dante was the supreme example of the literary, quasi-philosophical poet, and he stood for all that Solomos had learned to admire during his long period of education in Italy. But one of the basic contradictions in Solomos' nature was that,

22. Raizis, op. cit., p. 49.

although his father was an Ionian aristocrat and his education had been entirely in Italian, his mother belonged to the people of Zante.

Resulting partly from his feeling that, however aristocratic and Italian he might be in his manners, he really belonged to the people, and partly from his crusade on behalf of the demotic language,²³ Solomos was avidly interested in all the Greek poetry he could lay his hands on. Precisely what texts he knew is still a matter for debate—but it is beyond question that he knew Greek folk poetry intimately and had access to some medieval Greek literature as well.²⁴

The general question of Solomos' relation to Greek folk poetry is too large to be entered upon here. Personally, I believe that Solomos was affected at a deeper level than that merely of language and versification. But be that as it may I think it is worth comparing one of Solomos' last fragments in which the plant/bodiless spirit antithesis reappears, with a folk song and a medieval tale. It will be seen that Solomos has re-used the material to suit himself, but I believe a hint of his more sophisticated conception may already be implicit in the folk tradition.

The poem has come to be known as the 'Carmen Seculare',²⁵ since later editors thought it must belong to Solomos' projected poem on the new era beginning in Greece. The most substantial fragment, which again seems perfectly able to stand on its own, is as follows:

There is a tree—no humble weed or shrub—
Whose branches arch like fountains through the air;
Here think to see no bird, no touch of green,
Many its leaves, but on each leaf a spirit,

23. It has often been said that Solomos' patronage of the demotic language was the *result* of his mother's Zantiot origin. In fact Solomos was too objective and deliberate to espouse a cause for emotional reasons alone, and there is evidence that his stand was carefully and precisely thought out on the basis of his experience of the language question in Italy. See M. Vitti, 'Ο Διονύσιος Σολωμός και τὸ γλωσσικὸ ζήτημα στὴν Ἰταλία, *Nea Estia*, LXII (1957), 43–9, and idem, 'Riflessi della questione della lingua italiana sul poeta greco Dionysios Solomos', *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale*, I (1959), 79–94.

24. See M. Hatzidakoumis, *Νεοελληνικὲς πηγὲς τοῦ Σολωμοῦ* (Athens, 1968).

25. Ed. Politis, I, pp. 262–3.

And all its height this tree resounds resplendent
 With every sound of art and light of heaven.
 Earth, sea and sky tremble at the monstrous vision,
 The mighty chandelier in nature's temple,
 And a thousand thousand stars gleam with new light,
 Chant a thousand thousand songs as one.
 Beneath the tree sits the shepherdess at prayer,
 The stars receive it gladly as the earth the sun.
 That moment the Seraphim knew the depths of love,
 And Paradise is Paradise twice over.
 Who prophesied, stones, that you should put forth roses?

But now where are the feet that shone so fair?
 The shapely breast that has such worlds within it?
 The girl sits in the vineyards, playing with her lamb.

The magic tree occurs in several variations in Greek tradition. In the Byzantine story, its wonder lies in the *artistry* with which it was created. The master craftsman is Leo the Wise.

In the reign of the Emperor Theophilus, he fashioned a great planetree all of gold, and fashioned birds of every kind to sit upon it. He fashioned two lions also, and birds and (musical) instruments. . . . And when the wind blew, the planetree shook in the wind, and the birds also. And each one sang with his own voice. And all who saw the tree had great joy to behold with what wisdom and art he had fashioned it thus. And these things were the creations of Leo the Wise, with the art of the stars.

But the next Emperor was badly counselled, the story ends, and the tree and the birds and the lions were melted down for their gold.²⁶

Here the emphasis is on creating (*ποίημα*) and on art (*τέχνη*). But if Solomos knew this tradition, as is likely, he could not have

26. The story is quoted from the History of the Pseudo-Dorotheos of the late Byzantine period by N. G. Politis, *Λαογραφικά Σύμμεικτα*, II (Athens, 1921), pp. 23–6. He also quotes a shorter version from the Epic of Achilles, probably of the fourteenth century.

failed to know, in one of its variants, the demotic song of the magic tree.²⁷

In my garden I had a tree
and thither went to be consoled.
I know not what this tree may be
whose leaves are all of gold,
each branch in silver rolled.
And by its root a fountain lies,
cool water at the brink.
And as I bent my head to drink
I kissed her between the eyes.
Let me drink and drink my fill
and kiss my girl and kiss her still.

The supernatural (or *more than* natural) rarely has anything to do with art in the world of folksong. This tree belongs to Nature, but is more than naturally beautiful because of the beautiful girl (half-identified with the spring) sitting by its root.

In both of these traditional versions the leaves and branches of the tree are of gold or silver. Solomos characteristically does away with appearances, and indicates the supernatural aspect of the tree by having a *spirit* on each leaf. But the image of the chandelier comes closer to Leo's magic art.

Solomos has rejected the improbable ornamentation of Leo's tree (the golden lions and birds), together with the homely,

27. D. Petropoulos, *Ἑλληνικὰ Δημοτικά Τραγούδια*, II (Athens, 1958), p. 93. The Greek text (with refrains omitted) is as follows:

Δένδρον εἶχα στὴν αὐλή μου,
γιὰ παρηγοριά δική μου.
Καὶ δὲν ξέρω τί δέντρο 'ναι
πῶς ὁλόχρυσά τὰ φύλλα
κι ἀσημένια τὰ κλωνάρια.
Καὶ στὴ ρίζα κρύα βρύση
ποῖς τὴν κάνει τέτοια κρίση;
Κι ἔσκυψα νὰ πῶ νερό,
φιλῶ τὰ μάτια τῆς τὰ δυό.
Γιὰ νὰ πῶ καὶ νὰ γεμίσω
καὶ τὴν κόρη νὰ φιλήσω.

This version of the song was recorded by A. Passow, *Popularia Carmina Graeciae Recentioris* (Leipzig, 1860), no. DCXXV, p. 468.

more naturalistic ending of the folksong, which is after all a love song. The fountain in the song, however, is transferred, in a brilliantly dynamic image, to describe the tree itself ('whose branches arch like fountains through the air'). And the girl sitting at the bottom of the tree is faithfully reproduced in the shepherdess.

It will by now be apparent that we are dealing with a familiar relation of opposites. Solomos' tree is both natural and artificial; Nature and artifice are here presented in a fragile co-existence. But of course only for a moment. In the last three lines it is clear that the magical tree has disappeared.

The ambiguous nature of the tree, between Nature and artifice is evident even without these direct or indirect 'sources' to highlight it. The branches arching like fountains are vital and natural, the tree resounds both to the natural light of heaven and to 'every sound of art'; it is described as a chandelier, a creation of artifice, and the stars are imagined as singing. On the other hand the stones that put forth roses belong to Nature, albeit in a 'supernatural' state.

But this is not all. Bearing in mind what Solomos had written, many years before this poem, about poetry rising like a plant from the seed and at the same time descending as a 'bodiless spirit' from God, and also that in this poem Solomos is manipulating the opposite poles of Nature and artifice, one is forced to the conclusion that here he is once again exploring the implications of his art.

The imagery of the poem is remarkably close to the images Solomos used to describe 'the poem' in the notes to 'The Free Besieged'. This tree is at once rooted in the earth and a creation of the spirit, at which earth, sea and sky look on in wonder. It is, in a highly Dantescan image, 'The mighty chandelier in Nature's temple'.

A chandelier (like Dante's tree of Paradise) has its 'roots' at the top and its branches spread out downwards through the air. This is in direct contrast to the image of the fountain, which suggests a driving physical force thrusting the branches *upwards*. And finally it is not the tree itself that sings. The tree merely mediates: it *re-echoes* the sounds of art, it *reflects* the lights of heaven.

Solomos' tree, I believe, is Art itself, an ideal mingling of

natural vitality or spontaneity, and τέχνη or artifice; of earthly roots and divine substance. But the tree of art is a fragile, momentary thing. The shepherdess can have her prayer heard so long as this strange creation brings her close to heaven, affecting at once the Seraphim, in the spiritual sphere, who come to know love, and the stones, in the physical, that put forth roses. Then it passes, like the vision of 'The Cretan', and the girl is left sitting in the vineyards, playing contentedly with a lamb.

V

This swansong of Solomos contains the gentlest, most thoughtful account of the experience that links the physical and the spiritual. Poetry itself plays a role in the drama, and through poetry is the Metaphysical made Physical. Solomos has thus achieved a level of self-awareness impossible to the medieval story-teller or to the folk singer. Very often for them too, their art was the means of reconciling contradictions, but they would never be capable of standing back and considering themselves doing so. The folk poet has no need to think about the significance of what he is doing, *because he is doing it entirely successfully*.

Solomos was not speaking for the kind of community in which the value of poetry and song is taken for granted. Unlike the folk poet, he did not have a tradition of poets behind him, who had been saying the same *kind* of thing as he had to say, to a similar audience for generations. Solomos was faced with an audience which had never existed before—the modern Greek nation, with all its incongruities and crises of identity.

Struggling, after his initial success with the swashbuckling 'Hymn to Liberty' and 'Lyrical Poem on the Death of Lord Byron', to create a native Greek idiom capable of bearing the weight of his ideas, Solomos became more and more inward-looking. Not only in his personal life, but in his concern with poetry. Poetry, it seems, was the one vehicle which could successfully embody his ideas. But these ideas came to be centred increasingly around poetry itself.

Solomos' concept of poetry is a daring one, born perhaps of the isolation in which he spent the greater part of his life. But this placing of his art among the dramatis personae helps to

explain some of the apparent contradictions of Solomos—why for instance the poet who set out to write epic poetry for a national audience should have left behind only fragments, and these still unpublished at his death.

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